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Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas' Statement on Release of Citizens' Commission on Jail Violence Report

Now that the Citizens' Commission on Jail Violence has completed its mission, we can be sure of one thing: The Sheriff's Department cannot police itself.

That is why I will ask the board to make profound structural changes with regard to oversight of the department and create a system for permanent and independent citizen oversight of our jails.

On Tuesday, Oct. 2, I will introduce a Board motion directing the County Counsel and the Chief Executive Officer to assess the viability of establishing both a Citizens Law Enforcement Commission and an Inspector General for the Sheriff's Dept.

Last year I co-authored a motion for the creation of the Citizens' Commission on Jail Violence (CCJV) with Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky. Our goal was to obtain and analyze the data necessary to determine the full extent of the custody problems within the County's jails. Today, CCJV released 77 findings in its nearly 200-page report. After more than a year of investigation, testimony, and sifting through over 35,000 pages of documents; the evidence of inmate abuse and jail mismanagement is clear and convincing. Now that we have the data, we cannot stop here.

New oversight is warranted and it needs to be more substantial and comprehensive. The

change has to be structural because there are no easy remedies and shortcuts to accomplish the goal of fair and equitable treatment by those entrusted to provide public safety services. The CCJV report makes clear that the most robust change would be achieved by independent and consolidated oversight. We should not let another 20 years pass with a piecemeal and compartmentalized approach to public safety accountability. It is time to deal with the problems now, using a unified approach that achieves reform in L.A. County law enforcement, achieves constitutional policing and bolsters public trust.

None of the calls for change should be construed as a wholesale condemnation of the Sheriff's Department. Indeed, I anticipate the full support of the Sheriff and the department for greater citizen involvement and consolidated oversight. The Sheriff has clearly stated his determination to right this ship, and I take him at his word. Furthermore, the men and women of the department deserve a process that will no longer permit a few bad apples to besmirch the thousands of deputies who perform bravely and admirably every day.

We cannot be timid about tackling these policing issues. There are a number of deputies who have failed the public. These are not isolated incidents. The report refers to a culture of violence. This culture was repeatedly overlooked by jail custody management and Department executives.

Plainly said, we must make sure that people in custody are not victimized by those charged with their supervision. That's why we must steer the Sheriff's Department in a new direction.

Increased civilianization of the jail custody staffing may be a way to decrease inmate violence. There are far too many Sheriff's deputies who simply do not want to work in the jails but nonetheless are required to do so for the first five to seven years of their employment. By contrast, custody assistants are specifically trained for jail assignments and want to do this work.

The weight of the CCJV report will be measured by the manner in which those elected to maintain public safety move forward to address the problems and change the culture. Otherwise, the work of this Commission and staff will have been undertaken in vain.

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